PLAYFUL LEARNING: MELVILLE'S ARTFUL ART IN *MOBY-DICK*[1]

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Abstract: *It remains one of the great ironies of American literary history that Melville's Moby-Dick struggled so long for critical and popular recognition. It is a peculiar text (but, then, so are Hawthorne's novels), a romance of the whale fishery that involves such explorations of language itself, of words, metaphor, symbol, allegory and the processes (and significance) of narrative construction. This article analyses its 'peculiarities' as fundamental indicators of Melville's 'playful art' to argue the usefulness of a concept of 'play' to its appreciation. That Moby-Dick is allusive and multi-layered is well known. But for what apparent purpose and to what effect? Here, a claim is made that Melville simultaneously constructs and deconstructs meaning by demonstrating that things ('in complex subjects') never come simply or singly. The later Barthes and Derrida become part of this ship's crew and Moby-Dick is a postmodernist novel avant la lettre.*

> *There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.*
>
> Melville, *Moby-Dick*[2]

Melville's 'Whaliad'[3] is immediately peculiar. If its multi-form frame is amusingly eccentric, notwithstanding the formal idiosyncrasies of such famous predecessors in the field as *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Tristram Shandy*, it is also wonderfully engaging for here, it promises, is a work that is not only researched, compendious and novel but also immensely varied and playful. Melville's emphasis upon language reminds us overtly, and from the start, that words may as well be played with as spelled out and, therefore, that the boundary between the real and the speculative is endlessly negotiable. In this process of abundant accumulation, there is, as Tony Tanner suggests, 'an extraordinary feeling of totality – of immensity, range, inclusiveness.'[4] The title page offers the *text* of 'Moby-Dick; or, The Whale' and the epigraph from *Paradise Lost* with its provocative invocation of 'Leviathan'. The dedication to Hawthorne commemorates a fellow traveller in the mazy worlds of words and narrative, another American, the one who Melville acknowledges in 'Hawthorne and His Mosses' in terms that are also so obviously applicable to his own art: 'Certain it is … that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.'[5] The Etymology that follows, 'Supplied by a Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School,' lists terms for the whale

in different languages; but, in addition, in this collection of words and also in its amusing short portrait of the 'pale usher' with his lexicons, grammars and ostentatiously multinational gay handkerchief, it introduces the linguistic and conceptual reach of Melville's subject which is then extended so much further in the ten pages of extracts, from *Genesis* to Darwin, whose generic origins range from religion, philosophy, history, science and literature to the vital seaborne stuff of ships' logs and whaling lore. And with the reader embarked so queerly upon this literary voyage, what do we make of a 'whaling story' of 135 chapters in which the ship does not sail until Chapter 22, the ship's Captain does not appear until Chapter 28, the cry 'There she blows!' is delayed to Chapter 47, the first kill to Chapter 61, and in which the title figure appears in Chapter 133, three chapters (and an Epilogue) before the end? 'Tis strange indeed.

Melville was only thirty and already famous when he set about this enterprise. He could call upon his first-hand acquaintance with whaling voyages[6], just as he used his own experiences to write *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Redburn* (1849), *Mardi* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850), those differently inflected romances of the sea, travel, exotic places and adventure. But *Moby-Dick* is decidedly more ambitious and more bookish than these earlier writings. The image of Melville at work, in New York and then at 'Arrowhead', presents a man surrounded by a short library into which he dips freely and frequently in a process that in itself reinforces the interplay and blurs the distinction between experience and the imagination, the real and the symbolic. As Melville scholarship indicates, at the forefront are the Bible, Shakespeare and such classics of whaling lore as Thomas Beale's *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale*, Owen Chase's account of the sinking of the *Essex*, J.N. Reynold's 'Mocha Dick: or the White Whale of the Pacific: A Leaf from a Manuscript Journal', Frederick Debell Bennett's *Whaling Voyage Around the Globe*, J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* and William Scoresby Jr's *Voyage to the Northern Whale Fishery*. But in addition, Melville's leading influences, his ship's crew, also include the works of Byron and Scott, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Browne's *Religio Medici*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Emerson, Dante, Rabelais, Montaigne, Goethe, Shelley, Coleridge and Carlyle.[7] There he is, land-locked at Arrowhead, books his ship's timber, navigating by memory and reading, pushing on into the black night while winds shriek through the rigging, battering his deck and driving wild seas about the vessel of his imaginings. The poetry, he says, 'runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree'[8] and, writing to Evert Duyckinck, he describes a 'sort of sea-feeling' in the country: 'My room seems a ship's cabin; & at night when I wake up & hear the wind shrieking, I almost fancy there is too much sail on the house, & I had better go on the roof & rig in the chimney.'[9] In the absorption comes the

borrowing. Melville is a fine instance of the writer as agile borrower, of one who brings so many stories and books to the weaving (his metaphor) of this one, a process of construction that embodies thereby the markers for its own deconstruction with respect to variety, heterogeneity and the play of thought, imagination and language, to this work's capacious intertextuality. *Moby-Dick* exemplifies Barthes' definition of a text:

> *We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.*[10]

Formally exact, since Melville's citations and allusions are everywhere evident, this definition applies to his thematics as well – to his insistent attention to the whale's ubiquitousness and mystery, human obsessions with explanatory systems and control, ritual and the symbolic, and, therefore, to the very processes of mythopoesis itself.[11] His reflexive metafictional markers point to the intersection of 'process' and 'product.' Indicating a perspective on the nature of meaning as that which must be tracked through thickets of possibilities, they convey a lively sense of unending investigation in which the (false) comfort of ending gives way to the joy (and the joyful frustrations) of journeying itself, to the incessant movement of a restless mind and an always incomplete text:

> *- aye, chance, free will, and necessity – no wise incompatible – all interweavingly working together .... Thus we were weaving and weaving away. (p. 179)*
>
> *Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters. (p. 234)*
>
> *To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.* (p. 349)

Chapter 32 'Cetology' presents an early instance of the text's branching. With the Pequod launched, Melville holds that narrative 'trunk' in suspension, as it were, to provide the first of many discussions of cetology. A roll-call of sources, it serves not only to introduce the whale as a figure of continuing mystery and fascination, and the whale fishery as such an important nineteenth-century enterprise, but also for a discourse on method:

> *It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once, perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience! (pp. 124-5)*[12]

Here the voice is surely Melville's, one more part of the interplay in *Moby-Dick* between the author and narrator Ishmael as medium, that initially misanthropic and occasional seaman who parades about the narrative his pockets full of words, chatting in so many registers and then seeming to disappear, the one who alone survives to tell the tale when the ship goes down, a sorter of letters, the *Pequod*'s postman, picked up by the wandering *Rachel* in search of its own lost children.

When in September 1851 Melville wrote to Sarah Huyler Morewood, a Massachusetts neighbour, the gloss is jocular but the metaphors are significant. Warning her not to buy *Moby-Dick*, he added, 'It is not a piece of fine feminine Spitalfields silk – but is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships' cables and hausers. A Polar wind blows through it, & birds of prey hover over it.'[13] This text's cable has multiple strands: (i) the whaling narrative of the *Pequod* (ii) the cetological 'centre' and (iii) all of the metaphysical speculation (and mythopoesis) from the water-gazing of Chapter 1 'Loomings' through reflections upon the whale's whiteness and Ahab's monomania to such considerations of life, death, time and discontinuity as those presented in Chapter 114 'The Gilder'. Central to Melville's art, to his obvious fascination in the play of language, texts and meaning, the particular is also symbolic and, therefore, its reach exceeds all limitations of figures and context. As 'a thing of trophies' (p. 70), the Pequod is a weather- beaten composite of borrowings, indeed a symbolic ship of fools fitted out for an emblematic mad quest. Her ship's mates, Starbuck, Stubb and Flask represent not only main ports in the American whale fishery but pointedly different character types with contrasting views of their captain, the voyage and life. But the play with symbols is even more overt in the harpooners: Queequeg, Tashtego, Daggoo, and Fedallah, these representatives of different races and colours (brown, red, black and yellow man) who are further distinguished not only by their association respectively with the elements of water, air, earth and fire but by the roles they are assigned in the narrative. Most telling is the Queequeg-Fedallah opposition with the former cannibal and Polynesian prince as the text's figure of redemption (he is the noble savage as saviour, from his rescue of

drowning sailors to the final image of the coffin-lifebuoy and narrator Ishmael's survival, notionally on Queequeg's broad back inscribed in wood) whereas Fedallah the Parsee is bound in fire to Ahab's demonic quest and finally, with Ahab, to the body of the whale itself. As D.H. Lawrence emphasized all that time ago, in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, it is all so highly symbolic! With Ahab and Ishmael, the ship's complement of main players is complete. In Ishmael's summary: 'Here, then, was the grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals' (p. 158).

Melville's galvanic Faust of the quarter-deck has a mighty ancestry that includes Prometheus[14], Job, Satan, Faust and Lear[15]. With his appearance in the narrative preceded by such a collection of bemused hints and warnings, he comes with mystificatory baggage, like a figure from a nightmare. When Ishmael asks Peleg about Ahab, he is told 'He's a queer man, Captain Ahab – so some think – but a good one. Oh, thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear. He's a grand ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals' (p. 78). Situated in the grand tradition of overreachers, with Satan and Faust at the forefront and Conrad's Kurtz as a lineal descendant, shaped for deep thought, rebellious action and suffering, 'Old Thunder' may have his 'humanities' (including a wife and young child) but these are what he represses in his monomaniac obsession with the white whale and revenge. His distant wife is replaced in this drama by his phantom companion in fire, Fedallah the Parsee, the one with whom his bond exceeds his confessional moments with Starbuck and his Lear-like affection for cabin boy Pip, this text's Fool. Melville's exuberant play with the symbolic possibilities includes Ahab's first appearance on the quarter deck: 'He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them … a crucifixion in his face' (pp. 108-9). So bemused is Ishmael, he says he hardly noticed at first 'the barbaric white leg' (p. 109). For Ahab is 'branded' not only with the livid scar that runs down his face and neck (the old Manxman says there's likely a birth-mark on his body from crown to sole) but also by the loss of his leg which makes him not only definitively wounded, and thereby the more awesome and enigmatic, a very strange version of the Fisher King himself, but which also transforms him into the revenger. Hardly the archetypal classical revenger, (Orestes), nor the renaissance (Hamlet), Ahab is cast in this fatalistic grand drama as Satan with Fedallah as his Mephistopheles. His target is the whale that dismasted him, he claims, but as Lawrence says 'Of course he is a symbol. Of what?'[16] Ishmael's answer is that Ahab 'came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all

his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them' (p. 156). This is indeed a primary pre-Freudian example of condensation and displacement. Although Ahab is permitted the specific vengeance matter of a lost leg, he is perceived rather more evocatively as one fraught with anxieties about knowledge, power and control, a Faust prepared to sell his soul to the devil, a Satan challenging the very idea of a God-ordered universe. This is what Melville addresses in Ahab's grand speech-making on the quarter-deck:

> *All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. (p. 140)*

And in a reflective moment, alone, Ahab compounds the passion: 'They think me mad – Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened!' (p. 143). Despite those moments when even he is inspired by Ahab's passion, Starbuck tries to the end to persuade him that this is crazy vengeance 'upon a dumb brute', that the whale is innocent of intention. But in the penultimate chapter, with Moby-Dick having floated on two days, 'to-morrow will be the third', and with only 'The Chase – Third Day' ahead, the rhetoric holds: 'Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders. Look thou, underling! that thou obeyest mine' (p. 418). And Milton's Satan rumbles in the background: 'Awake, arise or be forever fall'n', and 'The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n'.[17]

Conceived dynamically then, as a figure of borrowings, Ahab is central to Melville's symbol-making, to this process by which he takes facts, characters, events and images beyond limitations of the literal into the larger reach of the symbolic. Evident in his first appearance on the quarter deck, in his fiery speeches to the crew, and in his references to the whale and to the doubloon, the figurative play is also fundamental to the image of Ahab alone in his cabin as he contemplates yellowish sea charts in his attempt to

track Moby Dick through the oceans of the world. With the scribbled pencil lines on the charts, these marks of his obsession, matching the deeply-etched lines on his forehead, he is a peculiar cryptographer: 'with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishments of that monomaniac thought of his soul' (p. 167). His is indeed a scribbled and scrambled soul (or brain) and Ahab is a bookish reader of the world, one for whom nothing comes singly or innocently. Ishmael may suggest that careful collation of ships' logs could establish patterns in the migratory habits of sperm whales, but with Ahab fixed upon one whale, this is a monster hunt of epic proportions – by virtue of its singularity and Melville's invocation of quest motifs, he and his 'knights and squires' are archetypal figures on a recurrent mad journey. In Ishmael's words, 'Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge' (p. 158). Of course they are specially picked, by Melville at his desk. When Ishmael wonders why they 'so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire' and suggests that 'all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go' (p. 158), he reaffirms that double-play of fascination and limitation that is the narrator's role.

Ishmael is a leading key to Melville's artful art. As Walter Bezanson points out, 'there are two Ishmaels, not one,'[18] the character who meets up with Queequeg in New Bedford, signs aboard the *Pequod* and participates in the hunt and the narrator who has survived to tell the tale. If the character is a leading actor in the drama, the narrator is even more important as the one struggling to represent it: 'in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught' (p. 159). He is an antecedent to Conrad's Marlow confronting the enigma of Africa, the heart of darkness and Kurtz: 'Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream …'[19] But whereas Conrad's experienced man of the sea is seriously enthralled and stern of temperament, Melville's Ishmael, though claiming to start with the 'hypos', is by turns serious and jocular, one who is open to experience, laughter and associative wanderings in the inexhaustible realm of ideas, stories and language as he fulfils his storyteller's task: 'And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.'[20] As Melville's spokesperson, he may seem, as Bezanson suggests, to drop 'in and out of the narrative with such abandon that at times a reader wonders if he has fallen overboard,'[21] but with his keen sense of wonder and his untiring predilection for intricacies of experience, incongruities and paradox he is an expert medium for New World exploration and for the creation of American narrative. Starting with reference to his gloominess, speculative Ishmael is also invitingly alert and amusing:

> *Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces – though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did … (p. 22)*

Chief among motives was his curiosity with 'the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself,' but he refers as well to 'the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds' and his 'everlasting itch for things remote' (p. 22). Thus all-rounder Ishmael registers not only the interrelated terror and comedy of his initial encounter with Queequeg at the Spouter Inn, their bed-sharing, Queequeg's 'bridegroom clasp' and the peculiar image of 'a cosy loving pair' (p. 57), but also his fascination with whales and the whale fishery. It matters little that Ishmael seems often to disappear, his character and voice displaced by author Melville, or that he speaks in different tongues. He is, after all, a fine narrative convenience, one whose double role as both participant and observer to the whaling adventure is integral to the primary action of the novel, to the act of narration itself. Establishing such a garrulous spokesman, and playing with his shifting dispositions from melancholic voyager to gamesome philosopher and engaging storyteller, Melville accentuates an irresistible sense of wonder that we assume is also his own but from which he can, thereby, introduce factors of difference.[22] Most important is Ishmael's readiness for experience combined with an inexhaustible interest in the mysteries of nature and humanity. Claiming a whaleship as 'my Yale College and my Harvard' (p. 101), he emphasizes not only Ahab's deep mysteries but the mysteries of the whale itself and, therefore, of the very idea of the order of things. If the book is to succeed, so much depends upon its persuading readers that the whale is extraordinary and, to this purpose, Ishmael's enthusiasm is infectious. Thus the whale 'swam the seas before the continents broke water' (p. 354) and 'Then the whole world was the whale's; and, king of creation, he left his wake along the present lines of the Andes and the Himmalehs' (p. 350). Existing for more than six thousand years, effectively immemorial, the whale is presented as a source of wonder to Pharaohs as well as to Nantucket whalers; it is, therefore, Job's Leviathan, Jonah's whale and Ahab's whale, commemorated in world literature, paintings, engravings and sculpture, with its form seen also in the shapes of mountains and in the stars. As Ishmael plays with a number of oppositions in conceptualizing the whale (innocent/malevolent, beautiful/monstrous, massive/delicate), and with such detail about its types and physical

characteristics, he also insists that it cannot finally be *known*. It retains its appeal to the imagination and, for Ahab in particular, it becomes a figure for the ineffable itself. Across the absorbing processes of his construction of this text, Melville retains Ishmael's seemingly tireless exuberance.

So *Moby-Dick* is a massive experiment in associative narrative construction and, in this sense, Melville's fondness for allusions is linked with his play with words and concepts. Lavishly evident in such chapters as 'The Whiteness of the Whale' and 'The Doubloon' in their expansive investigation of the ways in which perspectives operate and meanings are created, it may also be seen in such leaps of imagination as the following:

> *The Nantucketer, he alone resides and rests on the sea; he alone, in Bible language, goes down to it in ships; to and fro ploughing it as his own special plantation. There is his home; there lies his business, which a Noah's flood would not interrupt, though it overwhelmed all the millions in China. He lives on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie; he hides among the waves, he climbs them as chamois hunters climb the Alps. For years he knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthsman. With the landless gull, that at sunset folds her wings and is rocked to sleep between billows, so at nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales. (65-6)*

Simultaneously particular and vast, even introducing the idea of other worlds[23], the imagery is evocative. Like so much of Melville's writing in *Moby-Dick*, it combines the familiar with the strange in ways that constitute the text's typically strong sense of imaginative engagement. While this passage conveys Ishmael's memories of his own Nantucket experience, it also exceeds them. While it depends upon a basic documentary mode of narrative construction, it offers, as well, that striking example of a writer so at play with his ideas and with the language that the 'Dear Reader' contract is an invitation to shared voyaging in the realms of the imagination. A similar expansiveness marks the nine gams, those diversionary occasions for Melville's stories-within-the-story mode of narrative construction. Representing collectively the major nations of the nineteenth-century whale fishery, the ships arrive not only with their distinguishing marks of national identity and experience but also with their stories to tell and it is one more indication of the text's scope and playfulness that the stories function variously as parables, analogues and entertainments. Five of the nine bear scars that attest to their meetings with the white whale; the Town-Ho's story of Steelkilt and Radney is one that Melville expands in *Billy Budd*; and not

only is the Delight 'miserably misnamed' but also the Rose-bud whose stench is so ironically at odds with the idea of exquisite French perfume. If the Bachelor is a 'glad ship of good luck' (p. 374), heading home to Nantucket filled with oil and jollity, it contrasts pointedly not only with the skeletal Goney and the pitiful Rachel but also with the Pequod's gloominess. Providing variety and diversion within the narrative, the meetings also convey the increasing urgency of Ahab's monomania while contributing to the developing network of perspectives upon the mysterious white whale itself and, of course, to that carefully delayed moment when Moby Dick bursts into view to his hunters aboard the Pequod. So caught up with the imaginative possibilities of his grand subject, Melville casts off the limitations of 'naturalism' to enter the realm of the symbolic and to explore the compound effects it brings into play.

Like so many other grand movements in nineteenth-century American fiction (into the forest, down the river, and out to sea)[24], the Pequod's is a passage from time to timelessness, from the restrictions of the allegedly 'known' to the challenges and entrancements of what is yet to be discovered: 'we gave three heavy-hearted cheers, and plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic' (p. 96). But though they depart Nantucket on Christmas morning, thereby, in a sense, farewelling God as well as family, this crew and this ship's passage are not set free upon some unscribbled and inviting ocean of happy possibility. On the contrary, for the whole conception is so intricately packaged that any innocence to do with easy travel and simple meaning is replaced by the decidedly more intriguing complications of ambiguity, ambivalence, irony, allusion and multiplicity. For this is the real definition of Melville's artful art and it involves the acknowledgements he presents in the prefatory 'Extracts' and almost everywhere else in his fondness for metaphor and symbol as well as the rush of ideas and contexts. Ahab is not man alone; nor is Ishmael. Their definition and their function depend upon connections, so many of which are paraded overtly in this gamesome text with its vast field of reference, conceded as just a short selection of what might be possible: 'This whole book is but a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!' (p. 125). Such evidence invites us to discern Melville's seriousness and irony in those well-known remarks to Sophia Hawthorne on his composition of *Moby-Dick*:

> *But, then, since you, with your spiritualizing nature, see more things than other people, and by the same process, refine all you see, so that they are not the same things that other people see, but things which while you think you but humbly discover them, you do in fact create them for yourself – Therefore, upon the whole, I do not so much marvel at your expressions concerning Moby Dick. At any*

> *rate, your allusion to the 'Spirit Spout' first showed to me that there was a subtile significance in that thing – but I did not, in that case, mean it. I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that parts of it were – but the specialty of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing particular examples, yet intimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole.*[25]

Whatever Melville might write in letters to friends, the text of *Moby-Dick* demonstrates his perception that things may be what they are perceived to be but something else as well. With his delight in the play of language and meanings everywhere evident in *Moby-Dick*, it is a text that concedes the inexhaustible exchange processes of communication. If he has one foot in the Romantic camp, with his readings of Goethe and Coleridge, and Emerson's reformulations of them for an 'American' enterprise[26], the other moves towards the spirit of play that Derrida defines as the Nietzschean affirmation: 'the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.'[27] Intermixed with the Gothic darkness, with that 'Calvinistic sense' that he discerns in Hawthorne, Melville's imagination turns so readily to riddling. In Ahab's words: 'All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks' (p. 140) and, in narrator Ishmael's language, this perception becomes the disquisition on 'whiteness' as both 'the visible absence of color' and the 'concrete of all colors' (p. 165). Against finality, and in deference to the world's variety, questions continue because Melville's artful art resists ending.

ENDNOTES

[1]The expression 'playful learning' is taken from one of the earliest reviews of *Moby-Dick,* in London's *Morning Advertiser*, 24 October 1851. Published first in London in October 1851, and four weeks later in New York, Melville's big book excited contradictory responses, but this piece with its keen recognition of the work's allusiveness is one of the more favourable. The review published the next morning in London's *Athenaeum* (25 October 1851) by contrast reckons the book an 'ill-compounded mixture' and its author 'not so much unable to learn as disdainful of learning the craft of an artist.' These reviews and others are reprinted in the 2002 Norton Critical edition of *Moby-Dick*. It remains one of literary history's great ironies that *Moby-Dick* struggled initially for readers, particularly after the success of Melville's *exotics* (*Typee* and *Omoo*).

[2] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*. Norton Critical Edition, eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, Norton, New York, 2002, p. 284. Hereafter *Moby Dick*.

[3] The term is George Ripley's. His enthusiastic review of *Moby-Dick* appeared in the New York *Tribune*, 22 November 1851. See *Moby-Dick*, pp. 608-10.

[4] Tony Tanner, *The American Mystery*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 63. Tanner presents an effective analysis of Melville's 'weaving.'

[5] Published by Evert Duyckinck in his journal *The Literary World*, 17 and 24 August, 1850. Reprinted *Moby-Dick*, pp. 517-32. Melville's relationship with the man Lawrence refers to as 'blue-eyed Nathaniel' (See D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Viking, New York, 1964) is itself intriguing, composed much of admiration, respect and curiosity. Clearly, there is much of this blackness invested in that signal Faust of the quarter deck, Ahab.

[6] In early January 1842, Melville signed on to the Nantucket whaler *Acushnet* bound for Cape Horn and the Pacific. After skipping ship in the Marquesas, he escaped on an Australian whaler, the *Lucy Ann*, which took him to Tahiti (and mutiny and imprisonment) and then he shipped as boat-steerer on another Nantucket whaler *Charles and Henry* to Hawaii. By the time he returned home aboard the frigate *United States* in October 1844, and full of stories, Melville had been away for almost four years. He had just turned twenty-five. He was to write seven novels in the next six years.

[7] See Hershel Parker's useful summary in 'Melville's Reading and *Moby-Dick*: An Overview and a Bibliography', *Moby-Dick*, pp. 431-8. In addition, the two major studies of Melville's sources are Merton M. Sealts Jr's *Melville's Reading: Revised and Enlarged Edition*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1988, and Mary K. Bercaw's *Melville's Sources*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1987.

[8] In Melville's letter to Richard Dana, 1 May 1850 in *Moby-Dick*, pp. 532-3.

[9] Letter to Duyckinck in Ibid., p. 552.

[10] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Hill & Wang, New York, 1977, p. 146.

[11]Harold Beaver's overview is persuasive: 'Mythopoeia itself, in layer upon layer of contrasting mythologies, is the driving fuse of Melville's heroics. His very theme is the mythopoeic imagination: the neuroses of man in usurping the ritual role of Gods.' Introduction to *Moby-Dick*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 28.

[12] Cash and patience indeed. Melville's household at this time, at 103 Fourth Avenue, New York, in addition to his own growing family, included his mother, his younger brother and wife, and several sisters. He was able to purchase 'Arrowhead' with a loan from his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of Massachusetts.

[13] Reprinted in *Moby-Dick*, p. 564.

[14] The image of Prometheus the fire-stealer as rebel and sufferer is intrinsically evident throughout the portrait in Ahab's association with fire, his rebellion against traditional notions of order and normality, and his suffering. It is made explicit towards the end of Chapter 44 'The Chart': 'God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates.' (p. 175).

[15] Not four score years and not dividing any kingdom between daughters, Ahab is nevertheless Lear-like with Pip as his Fool. Just as Melville draws upon *Macbeth* in the matter of riddling prophecies (the false comfort of witches' predictions for Macbeth's future and Fedallah's for Ahab's in Chapter 117), he invokes Lear's fond indulgence of the Fool in Ahab's care for Pip. See Chapter 129.

[16] D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, p. 145.

[17] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I.

[18] See Walter E. Bezanson, '*Moby-Dick*: Work of Art' in Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield, Dallas, (eds.), *Moby-Dick: Centennial Essays*, Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas, 1953, in *Moby-Dick*, pp. 641-57.

[19] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 39.

[20] From *Job* 1. 14-19, Melville's epigraph to the Epilogue to *Moby-Dick*, p. 427.

[21] Bezanson in *Moby-Dick*, p. 647. I agree with Bezanson that readers should resist any temptation to collapse Ishmael and Melville together. However often Ishmael might seem to disappear and Melville's voice to take over, there are also distinctions to be made between

author and narrator. That factor of distance, or difference, allows Melville to exploit shifts in perspective as he creates art partly from experience.

[22] In such famous (and various) examples of first-person narration as Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the strategy allows the writer to dramatize fascination and complexity while also exploiting matters of voice, perspective and language. The material *matters* to the extent that the narrator is captivated by it and struggles to present it. Accepting the invitation to enter the text's world, the reader is caught up in the dramatics of its presentation.

[23] The notion of other or alternative or possible worlds (and their functions) is addressed by Doreen Maitre, *Literature and Possible Worlds,* Pembridge Press/Middlesex Polytechnic Press, London, 1983.

[24] I have in mind James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* but, with their different inflections, there are also concessions to such interplay (and to symbolic possibilities) in Hawthorne (particularly *The Scarlet Letter*) and Thoreau.

[25] Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (eds.), *The Letters of Herman Melville*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1960, p. 146. The letter was written on January 8, 1852. Notwithstanding the distinctions often made between symbol and allegory, I take Melville's reference to allegory (and particularly to 'subordinate allegories') to indicate what I refer to here as the process of the symbolic. Most important is that sense in which a specific word or image may refer to the local and, at the same time, to something larger and general, with the one being read through the other. Whereas the Romantics (Goethe, Schlegel and Coleridge) emphasized the spiritual as part of this exchange, it may also be seen as secular, as part of the most basic (post-Saussurean) operation of language itself. For a discussion of Melville's symbolism that emphasizes the Romantic connections, see Leon Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987.

[26] See such essays as "The Poet' and 'The American Scholar'. Melville's admiration for Emerson is expressed, for example, in the famous passage in his letter to Evert Duyckinck: 'Now, there is something about every man elevated above mediocrity, which is, for the most part, instinctually perceptible. This I see in Mr Emerson. And, frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool; - then had I rather be a fool than a wise man. – I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he don't attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plummet that will. I'm not talking of Mr Emerson now – but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving and coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.' Davis and Gilman, *Letters*, p. 79.

[27] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 292.